
PROPOSITIONS ON ECUMENICITY YOU MAY CONSIDER DECONSTRUCTING

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Introduction

The following fourteen propositions were prepared for the opening session of the online consultation on “Teaching Ecumenism in the Context of World Christianity” held by the World Council of Churches Ecumenical Institute at Bossey in June 2021. They were drafted as a discussion starter. Having limited time to introduce a broad subject, I chose to do it through independent yet interrelated propositions whose formulation maximised meaning while minimising words.

Given that (1) the notion of “world Christianity”, in the sense it is understood in the title of this conference, presupposes a critical reference to the interrelated Eurocentric projects of global modernisation and Christianisation; and given (2) the truism that the understanding of ecumenicity and the teaching of ecumenism are interwoven, it seems constructive to open this conference by asking ourselves whether we could try to reach a good level of disagreement on what we mean by ecumenicity or ecumenism.

Proposition 1

On the Modernity of Ecumenicity

The modern ecumenical movement is “modern” not only because as a movement it is a recent phenomenon within Christianity, but also – and perhaps mainly – because it emerges as North-Atlantic Christianity renews itself and interacts with the emergence of and progress towards **one** world, **one** humanity, under the hegemony of European colonial and rationalist modernity, by responding to it eschatologically and ecclesialogically in missionary, pacifist, social-transforming, and doctrinal ways which included a clear concern for Christian unity – either as strategy or as vision – and were pursued through Enlightenment methods such as conferencing on the basis of the call to take the gospel to the new end of the world; conferencing on the basis of moral values for justice and peace or conferencing on the basis of confessional truth claims in order to strengthen a rediscovered common ground among divided churches and address remaining differences and disagreements.

Proposition 2

On the modern unity of humanity as horizon of ecumenicity

Modern ecumenicity evolved as an attempt at concerted responses to the different historical configurations of the modern vision of the unity of humanity as its constitutive horizon by calling churches, missionary societies and inter-denominational movements (1) to join in the expansion of the Western Christian civilization and modernisation through “the evangelization of the world in this generation”; (2) to unite in mission in opposition to what modern ecumenicity saw as the false unity of humanity in secularism, Communism, and Fascism; (3) to participate positively, under a Christocentric universalism, in *mission Dei*, in the universal history of God’s salvation in Christ as the

final destination of the evolving history of humanity and human unity towards “responsible societies”; and finally, (4), under the theological recognition of the sacredness of the secular, to embrace human struggles for emancipation as signs and servants of God’s salvation in Christ, towards just, participatory and sustainable societies or towards justice, peace, and the integrity of creation.

Proposition 3
On the oneness of the Church as
foundational to ecumenicity

Modern ecumenicity contends that there is only one Church: the teaching of the New Testament about Jesus’ messianic/apocalyptic movement; about the (one) people of God, the (one) body of Christ and the (one) temple of the Holy Spirit, is subsumed under the third article of Nicene Creed – “we believe in One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church” -; it is held firmly by eastern and western Christianity; it is re-affirmed by the 16th century magisterial Reformers (who never conceived of re-founding the one Church or normalising the proliferation of “denominations”); and made the quintessence of ecumenicity by the modern ecumenical movement in its early years as it established a world “council of churches”; as it placed the term *koinonia* at the heart of its vision; and as it made the overcoming of the ecclesiological divide, expressed in Eucharistic fellowship, its ultimate objective.

Proposition 4
On the ecumenical problem as fundamental
ecclesial division

2. As a result of proposition 3, what is meant by the ecumenical problem in its strictest sense is not the existence of diversity within Christianity, but the abnormal situation of ecclesial division represented by the contradiction between the affirmation that “there

is only one Church” and the experience that there are many “churches” which do not fully recognise each other as the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church and, as a result, are not in Eucharistic communion with each other, and which exist side-by-side today no longer simply as divided churches, but as confessional cultures or traditions within a growing cultural diversity, claiming consistence with the foundational Tradition while remaining at least to some extent incompatible with each other while bearing within themselves and among themselves the expressions of the divisions of humanity such as wealth and poverty, xenophobia, racism or patriarchy.

Proposition 5

On how ecumenicity happens

Ecumenicity, understood as fulfilling the imperative of making visible in history God’s gift to the Church of unity in Christ through the Spirit, (1) takes root in the anomaly of the experience of unity in allegiance to Christ despite the experience of division as churches; it proceeds through dialogue, cooperation and mutual care, on the basis of the tacit recognition by each church that “the membership of the Church of Christ is more inclusive than the membership of their own church body” and that the other churches have at least what Calvin once called *vestigia ecclesiae* or, more positively, elements of the true Church; and (2) it unfolds (a) as the churches that confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour seek fundamental consensus on apostolic faith, the preaching of the gospel, sacramental life and ministry, taken as universal norms of unity; and (b) as they fulfil their common calling and “act together in all matters” – such as the search for the unity of humanity – “except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately”.

Proposition 6
On how ecumenicity is Eurocentric

While the European colonial expansion and the Protestant missionary expansion determined the globalisation of the ecumenical problem described above - by exporting to the global south the schisms and the denominational or confessional expressions of violent divisions that took place during the European moment of Christianity -, its solution, called here “ecumenicity” lost universality throughout the 20th century: in Europe, due to the persistent memory of the connexion between divisions such as the Great Schism or the Reformation and violence (crusades, religious wars, world wars), its ecclesiological core remained clear and prominent and the Enlightenment inspired the move from ecclesial isolation to ecumenical dialogue on commonalities and remaining disagreements (what some would call “Faith and Order ecumenism”), whereas in the former missionary lands its ecclesiological core became opaque and virtually irrelevant because the prominence of the theological heritage of the Radical Reformation in the geographic expansion of Protestantism West and Southward gave it an eschatological outlook in which (1) evangelism and social transformation – not always together - gained in prominence over against the European conflict of ecclesiologies; and in which (2) the conflict of ecclesiologies came to be experienced as healthy ecclesial biodiversity to be protected.

Proposition 7
On the quest for the true unity
as the struggle for the true division

The ecumenical theological expressions of a dialectic view of history, culture and faith promoted by critical theories since the 19th century, which claim the historicity of the churches and therefore write the search for Christian unity within local and global

dynamics of domination and emancipation such as colonialism-anti-colonial revolutions; centre-periphery; first world-third world; dependence-liberation; north-global south; patriarchy-gender; white supremacy-minorities etc., can be successively described within the ecumenical movement by polarisations such as theological-non theological factors in Christian unity; ecclesial ecumenism-ecumenism of movements; oikoumene of capitalist domination versus the oikoumene of solidarity with the poor and marginalised; that could be subsumed by the notion of ecumenism in tension, in which “the quest for the true unity is at the same time the struggle for the true division”.

Proposition 8
On the crisis or transition of
ecumenicity

If ecumenicity exhibits elective affinities with modernity, it follows that it is plausible to contend, as some have done, that under deeply transformed historical and cultural circumstances worldwide, the search for the visible manifestation of the One Church and the One world is not only challenged by growing uncertainties concerning the vision, the methods and the actors of the movement - as it is confronted by growing religious diversity (instead of the growth of a Christ-centred exclusivism); as it is confronted by the systemic inequalities and the ecological crisis catalysed by globalisation (instead of growing human integration through economic growth leading to progress and prosperity for all); as it is confronted by the fragmentation of global Christianity (instead of the growth of united and uniting churches towards full visible unity) – but that this new historical situation “tolls the bell” for ecumenism as movement; signals its crisis; or points to its transition to a new and more promising ecumenical paradigm.

Proposition 9
On the insufficiency of ecumenical theology

The theological formulation of an ecumenical problem is not the sufficient description of that problem and, correlatively, the theological solution of an ecumenical problem is not the sufficient basis for the overcoming of that problem and the restoration of ecclesial communion.

Proposition 10
**On the ambivalence of ecumenical dialogue
based on confessional truth claims**

While modern multilateral and bilateral dialogues based primarily on the confrontation or comparison of confessional truth-claims lead often to convergence among theologians; to greater friendship between some churches or world communions; and occasionally to the restoration of ecclesial communion among them, it exhibits at the same time a tendency to underestimate infra-textual commonalities and to overestimate remaining differences to the extent that the achievement of consensus on one controversial theme is almost inevitably followed by the identification of several new topics requiring further dialogue, which leads to the perception that ecumenical dialogue is infinite; that ecumenical dialogue is self-perpetuating; the ecumenical dialogue is an end in itself rather than a method; and that it ultimately reinforces what it seeks to overcome by promoting the reconfessionalisation of ecumenical actors presumably in search for unity.

Proposition 11
**On the sociological opacity and decline of
Ecumenism**

It has been argued that in contexts of fast dechristianisation such as Western Europe, the hyper-modern condition is more conducive to (1) a growing

interest in the “macro-ecumenism” of interreligious dialogue; (2) a fusion of traditional confessional cultural identities; or (3) to a renewed interest in confessional identities, rather than to the Christian ecumenism of inter-confessional dialogue and organisation (such as the WCC) because the remaining intra-Christian differences which are the object of ecumenical theology and organised ecumenism have lost their cultural relevance, their sociological density, their transparency: they have become sociologically marginal or hard to be understood and have also lost their cultural relevance in times of rejection of religious institutional authority.

Proposition 12
**On the future of ecumenical dialogue as
archaeology**

It is possible to envisage the future of ecumenical multilateral and bilateral dialogues in ways in which textual truth-claims (dialogue through texts based on normative textualities) would lose part of their hegemony as the privileged basis of theological convergences preparing the way for ecclesial communion in favour of a kind of archaeology of hidden communion, that means, in favour of the search for underground or infra-textual *vestigia ecclesiae* or elements of the true church that do not necessarily find their way into texts about normative textualities, but which are no less important as potential bonds of fellowship.

Proposition 13
**On the future of ecumenical dialogue as
the search for semantic equivalences**

It is possible to envisage the future of ecumenical multilateral and bilateral dialogues in ways in which textual truth-claims (dialogue through texts based on normative textualities) would lose part of their

hegemony by accomplishing a movement from the search for symmetric lexical equivalences between two or more confessional languages to the search for semantic equivalences between them so that the absence of symmetric translations between words from confessional languages is not seen as an index of ecclesial estrangement, but it is transcended by the charity-based search for semantic equivalences involving different words from one confessional language that may be at variance with words from another confessional language or languages.

Proposition 14
On teaching ecumenism as the description of
infinite diversity

The approach to ecumenical research and study from an epistemological location which claims to be external to the churches' movement from division to their unity and the unity of humanity may certainly postulate the equivalence of different or conflicting ecclesiologies, old and new, and rely on appealing assumptions such as: (1) since its origins Christianity has been constitutively christianities or messianic christianities tamed by imperial Christianity; (2) there is no universal norm whereby to reconcile the infinite diversity of churches described by ecumenical analysis with the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church confessed in the Creed for our salvation; and (3) the One Church confessed in the creed cannot but be invisible; (4) there is no empirical evidence that the ecclesial landscape engendered by world Christianity converges with the search for the visible manifestation in history of the unity of Church of Christ that constitutes the ecumenical utopia.